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TITLE:	MOTOR VOTER REGISTRATION: COLORADO CASE STUDY
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Executive Summary

By implementing motor voter registration upgrades, Colorado transformed an inefficient multi-step paper-based system into a modern streamlined electronic automatic voter registration system that complies with the National Voter Registration Act in just five years. The process changes included:

- Incorporation of signature pads in offices of the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV),
- Elimination of paper forms (and a move to all-electronic data entry),
- Electronic transfer of information between DMV and the Colorado Department of State (CDOS),
- New DMV software programmed to eliminate duplicate questions,
- A change in the presumption about voter registration (from opt-in to opt-out),
- Integration of voter registration into the DMV web portal to eliminate confusion and maximize participation,
- Adoption of motor voter registration language specifically tested for usability, and
- New legislation allowing for automatic address and name changes.

These changes resulted in significant positive impacts for the DMV, DMV customers and voters, and CDOS. Significantly, the state was able to make the vast majority of these modifications administratively, with no need for authorizing legislation.

After implementation of the process changes, the Colorado legislature passed SB19-235, requiring adoption of "Oregon style" automatic voter registration. A bill sponsor acknowledged, "Colorado already has a leading elections system in the country, however, there are ways we can improve it even more. This bill ensures our voter rolls are secure, accurate, up to date and that everyone who is eligible to vote can not only receive their ballot but send and access their ballot."[1] Thus, as of July 1, 2020, Colorado will no longer be using the system described in this case study. Nevertheless, because of the breadth of the process upgrades and the robust data available about their impact, an examination is instructive for other states.

While what works for one state is not a guarantee that it will work in another, Colorado's efforts provide important lessons for policymakers to consider in devising their own motor voter registration upgrade plans.

MEASURING THE IMPACT

The impact of motor voter registration upgrades in Colorado is best measured under the following categories:

- **Transaction Time and Initial Wait Time Decreased:**
  Public opinion of DMVs is often based on how long customers wait to interact with staff. The motor voter registration process upgrades – especially the adoption of the language tested and recommended by the Center for Civic Design – reduced each affected driver's license transaction by 20 to 30 seconds, which time savings contributed to an approximate four-minute decrease in initial wait time from the DMV's overall IT modernization project. These times are likely to decrease further as a result of the now-fully implemented automatic address and name change legislation, eliminating voter registration questions for the 45% of DMV driver's license customers who do not have a need for voter registration services.

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[1] John Bowden, "Colorado lawmakers send automatic voter registration bill to governor's desk," *The Hill* (May 2, 2019) (*quoting* state Rep. Daneya Esgar), *available at* https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/441920-colorado-lawmakers-send-automatic-voter-registration-bill-to-governors (last reviewed September 16, 2019).

- **Access and Usage of Motor Voter Registration Opportunities Increased:**
  Data clearly demonstrates the NVRA motor voter process upgrades led to much higher usage of motor voter registration services—overall, for new voter registration applications, and for address updates.

For example, in the following chart, total motor voter registration usage numbers are significantly higher during the off-year period when most process upgrades occurred (2017-2018) compared to the two periods that include presidential elections (2011-2012 and 2015-2016). (Timing of the upgrades is show by the numbers in squares.) This strongly suggests that the process upgrades caused the huge increase in volume.
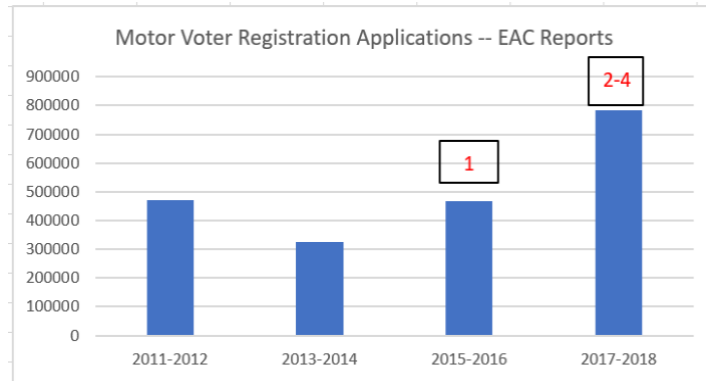
Similarly, the following graph shows the sustained increase in motor voter registration activity catalyzed by the identified process changes (again, shown by numbers in squares).
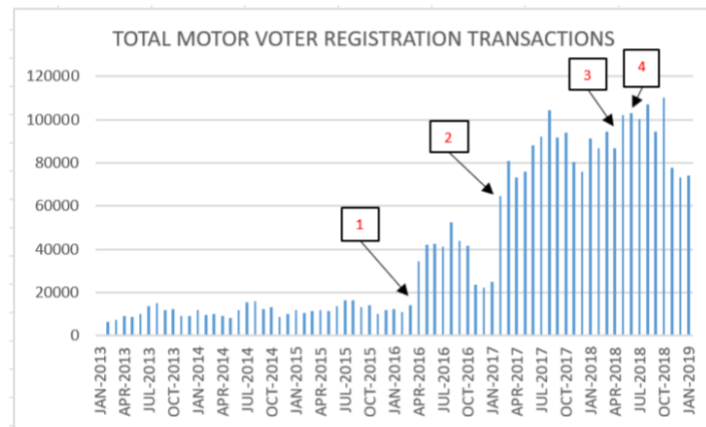
The process changes yielded increases in both new voter registration applications and address updates—but the increase in address updates dwarfs the number of new voter registration applications. For example, the volume of voter registration address updates is so much larger than new voter registration applications it is hard to discern the impact on new voter registration applications when the two are plotted on the same graph, as shown below.

CDOR Transactions by Month
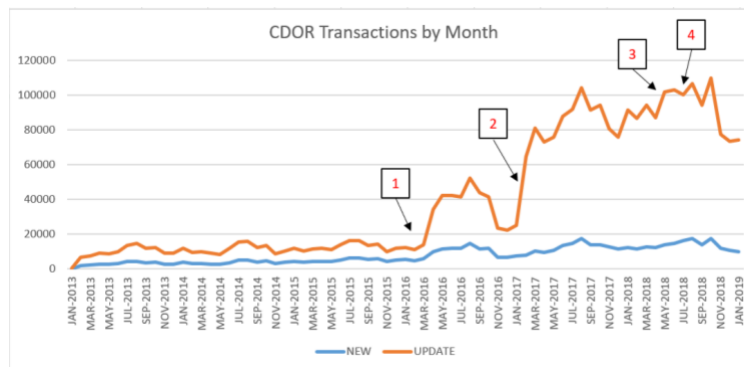
By disaggregating the data and plotting new voter registration application separately from updated voter registrations, it is clear that the process upgrades catalyzed significant increases in number for both.

POLICY LESSONS

There are at least three policy lessons learned in Colorado that other states should consider when updating and modernizing their own motor voter registration systems.

- **Online DMV customers are approximately two times more likely to use motor voter registration services than in-office customers.** Thus, it is important to ensure that DMV web portals seamlessly integrate automatic address updates and online voter registration in a user-friendly streamlined manner.

- **Forty five percent of DMV customers seeking a driver's license do not need voter registration services—these individuals are already registered to vote and reside at the same address.** Thus, providing DMVs access to current voter registration status allows the tailoring of voter registration questions to meet the needs of the customer, or eliminate it entirely for individuals who are already registered to vote at their current residence, further shortening transaction and wait times.

- **Voter registration updates far outweigh new voter registration applications, demonstrating effective motor voter registration is an important tool of voter registration list maintenance.** This cannot be overstated: The motor voter registration portion of the NVRA is commonly viewed as a mechanism to bring people into the political process – which it does – but when implemented well, it more frequently allows election officials to keep their voter registration lists up-to-date with the most recent information.

HOW COLORADO MADE THIS HAPPEN

It is not easy for a state to make process modifications that involve multiple agencies in the short span of a few years. Common obstacles include differing agency priorities, bureaucratic resistance, technology challenges, and resource shortages. These things occurred in Colorado, but several factors contributed to overcoming the obstacles. Most notably:

- **Relationship-Building:**
  In Colorado, relationship development was key. Both Elections Director Judd Choate and DMV Senior Director Mike Dixon recognized and prioritized relationship-building and communication between their offices to address and upgrade the state's motor voter registration processes. Over several years, the development of a more trusting relationship between their teams allowed process upgrades to come to fruition. The initiation of the state's NVRA Working Group was especially significant, bringing all stakeholders together to provide input and buy-in, and to recognize the potential of the DMV IT system modernization project.

- **Internal Advocacy:**
  Different agency missions lead to different priorities, but that doesn't need to be a roadblock. In particular, while voter registration is one of the core concerns of elections agencies like CDOS, it is simply one of many responsibilities handled by the DMV—and one for which they often do not receive direct funding. That can make it difficult for an entity like a DMV to prioritize process changes when what's in place seems to work. The legal memos and explanatory presentations that CDOS prepared for the Colorado Department of Revenue (CDOR, which houses the DMV) helped move along the understanding of the need to make process fixes—and the resulting benefits.

- **Investment in Resources:**
  More frequently than not, process changes involve the investment of significant resources – both time and money – and these process changes were no different. Fortunately, the Colorado DMV was already planning an IT modernization of its driver's license system. Including motor-voter registration modifications was a cost-effective method to improve that system as well. The costs for the motor voter changes were easily absorbed. In addition, for those upgrades that were not part of the original DMV system modernization, CDOS paid for the DMV motor voter registration technology upgrades and worked with CDOR to write the requirements.

About the Author

Lisa J. Danetz, consultant to Democracy Fund, has worked in the voting rights, money in politics, and democracy field as a policy expert, advocate, and lawyer for 20 years. She has developed a particular expertise on voter registration through government agencies and, most recently, has been doing work within the AAMVA (DMV) community to provide information and support related to voter registration and election administration responsibilities. In addition to her work with Democracy Fund, she has worked with Demos, and the National Voting Rights Institute, among others.

Ms. Danetz has published and been a frequent speaker on voting rights issues, including testimony regarding agency-based voter registration before the Senate Rules and Administration Committee, the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, and the United States Commission on Civil Rights. She's been quoted in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Bloomberg*, among other publications. She has also appeared on television and radio.

Ms. Danetz received her B.S. from Yale University and her J.D. cum laude from New York University School of Law.